

WHILE THE RIVER WAS HIGH

The sun stood over the sacred silk-cotton tree toward the Gankwe side of the land. Across the path leading from somewhere in the back of our shelter the parasol ants, each with its strip of green many times its size, made their way toward an unknown spot where no shelter stood, and no one trod. Like a wave the wide ribbon of green rose and fell as it crossed the ridges of the pathway. In unending numbers they came, and the lizards darting in and out of the brush swerved in the direction of the shelter to avoid the marching line, so that at our feet things moved now up, now back again.

While the men were at the landing place, one of the women who was drying rice on the high flat rocks opposite our shelter paddled over in her boat, and, passing the men with a formal greeting, walked on and stopped to talk with us. She was not a young woman. Her time for childbearing was long over, her wrinkled breasts sagged almost to her waist. The cicatrized designs which once had stood out so clearly, and in her youth had been so valued, were but faintly penciled on her face and about her breasts. Had she cared, she might have reopened the cuts, might have had ashes rubbed into them to make the keloids stand out black and alive against the dark brown of her skin. But what need had a woman her age to care? What need to urge life into symbols of fertility on face and between breasts and about her navel, when her time for fruitfulness was over? Of what use to reanimate the incised scrolls between her thighs, when the legend they told in terms of reproduction was for her a dead legend?

She came toward us slowly, balancing a bottle on her head. A faded cloth covered her from waist to knee, and at her waist a bit of the kerchief necessary to the attire of the married woman, even at work, could be seen. She wore a few beads on a cord about her neck, but she had no other ornaments, for ornaments were for festive occasions, and the cloth tied about the neck and worn cape fashion was for women who had children to carry straddling their backs, and woven garters below the knee were conceits of the young.

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888 young. Once she, too, had liked to have her calf look round and full.

[437] "Will you exchange this bottle of palm oil for tobacco?"
[276] she asked, showing her empty clay pipe.

[784] She came in, saying she would like to rest, and began unfastening her top tunic so that she might make a pad of it on which to sit down on the ground, for the earth spirits forbid women who had reached puberty to sit upon the bare earth. In her second tunic, somewhat fresher than the top one, she stood hesitating, looking about her for a place to sit down, until we brought her a carved stool we had bought the day before. Instead of putting on the top pangi again, she used it to cover her knees.

[576] "Bak'a muye," she said, "white woman, you ought to cover your knees, too, when you sit."

And sitting there, examining us and our belongings, she muttered her comments about our appearance and dress as she smoked, and muttering she swayed slightly, until the swaying rhythm seemed to bring a melody into her head, and she began to sing.

[533] *"The American Bak'a
Have come from far,
American koni
Has brought them
To the Saramacca River,
To the Saramacca people;
They must not sicken
They must not die."*

While the men on the shore talked and called upon their gods to keep them free, the woman rocked and sang this invocation for our safety, forgetting for the moment that we were whites, whom the ancestors hated.

"You have so much wealth," she said to the white man, looking about her at our provision boxes, "you must have many wives."

And back again she went to her song, repeating the words over and over, until seeing people approach she rose slowly and went back to the river where her rice was drying.

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that we walk the Bak'a with pleasure, that he treat us well, that we walk in safety. Thank you."

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The men in the other canoes, who had gathered about Sedefo's boat, clapped their hands, as Sedefo had done, and said "Thank you," then took up their paddles.

We had noticed that when Sedefo spoke, Bibifo's lips had moved, as though he were either repeating the prayer, or speaking his own, but when the others joined in the voiced "Gran' tangi!" he was silent.

"Did you pray, Bayo?" we asked. Yes, he had. He had prayed for us, too. Did Bibifo also pray for the white man? But before Bibifo could answer, Bayo laughed aloud.

"Bibifo is *kerki suma*—a church man. Call him Adrian, it will please him. I call him Bibifo, nothing else."

"And you, Bayo?"

"I—you will take me with you to Africa. I want to learn African obia, and come back to the Saramacca, and be a big obia man here on the river."

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Old Bibifo accepted his great-grandson's jibes with good humor. We were sorry for the old fellow who was so little at ease with the other men, and was so mercilessly twitted by the youngster in the b

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If the old man were to make a suggestion to him about a channel which Bayo had decided against, then he would turn brazenly, and exclaim, "Massa cow!" This is part of the proverb which says that a man who owns the cow has the best right to say where it shall graze. If Bibifo objected when Bayo attempted to do something that seemed impossible, he would face about smilingly and say, "The power which has raised the monkey from the ground and taught it to live safely in the trees is not dead yet."

[538]

"Bibifo," we said, making conversation with the old man, "Why do we go close to the shore?"

"In the center the current is swift and the river deep. When we go in the center, then we use only paddles. It is

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782 Among the people of one group, the principal ceremony
241 may be held in the clearing itself. The drums are brought,
535 and men and women and children pray for fertility. The
beautifully carved apinti drum sounds the invocation to the
Great God and to the ancestors, while the tall agida drums
are brought to call the earth spirits. Two by two the men
dance susa, the dance which in pantomime reproduces an
ancient warrior's combat with spear and shield, the winner
taking on a new combatant, until the final winner is given
a wand as a reward, and gains for himself the title of
"G'aman of Susa" until the next dance is held. Other
dances follow. Perhaps the women now line up in two long
[585] rows facing each other, and dance bandamba, the dance
[845] which celebrates marriage and the birth of twins, and the
birth of a child who is born feet foremost. The motions are
the slow rhythmic manipulations of the muscles of hips and
[840] abdomen. It is a dance of fertility, danced by the very
young girls as well as by those who have borne children.
But the women who are past the age for dancing sit with
• [888] their men, arms interlaced, swaying to the rhythms of the
songs they sing. . . . There are offerings to the earth
spirits, poured upon the earth out of black obia pots and
[769] calabashes, while other offerings are set upon the ground for
the ancestors.

In another settlement, the ritual would be chiefly carried
on in the village itself, and there might be a local dance of
[842] fertility, danced nowhere else on the river. "An old, old
ancestréss taught it to us," the villagers would say.

When it is time to plant, the woman plants with the
462 man's help.

241 "When I plant a new field," said the younger woman, "I
782 pray as I work."

539 And this is her prayer:

*O Sky God, Mother of the Earth, Ancestors,
I am planting a field,
Make it bear;
People who come to me must eat,*

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get the tchina which, if we do not break them, will let us stay healthy. Both our parents care for us."

He thought for a moment, and then, with a laugh, he wondered as Awingu had wondered that early morning at the planting ground.

"Is it not so in your country, Bak'a," he said, "that you ask me so often about these things?"

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"Massa cow," we heard Bayo call out again and again to his great-grandfather Bibifo, when he wanted to indicate to the old man that he knew what he was about. Bibifo accepted the reproof with unvarying meekness and good humor.

This relationship between them puzzled us. Yet the other men, overhearing Bayo's brusque words to Bibifo, made nothing of it. Before strangers, Bayo was subdued, shy. He stuttered ceremonially when he addressed a man of rank. He pitched his voice only a little above a whisper when he was in a strange village. Toward Kasanya and Sedefo and Asikanu he was respectful, and showed reserve. When he wanted his hair trimmed he came to Angita for help, or, better still, to the young man at the prow of Kasanya's boat who, like Kasanya, was of his own clan.

The old man was not a forceful fellow. That was, perhaps, the reason, we thought at first. Then we wondered if it was not because Bibifo had become Adrian, and no longer wore obias to carry him well on the water—because he had forsaken the old gods. But the other men treated Bibifo with the respect due an old man. When Kasanya killed a monkey, and his own pole-man could not share it with him because he was a twin and twins did not eat monkey, he turned to Bibifo with the pole-man's portion, and not to Sedefo, or to Asikanu, who was the brother of a clan head, and himself a possible successor to his brother's chieftainship.

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We had had occasion to observe a not dissimilar manner of interchange between a young girl and an elderly woman in one village after another.

In one such village, a girl, who did not yet have her breasts, answered an old woman's reprimand with, "No, kambo, I will go down to the river later."

Kambo! She who makes trouble for me. . . .

The old woman said nothing.

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The most striking instance, however, occurred in the village of the Granman. Moana Yankuso was held in no little fear everywhere on the river. It was not his rank alone as headman of all the clans, however, that had won him the reputation of a man to be obeyed. He was a powerful man, a great politician, and in every sense a personalist, a man who knew how to dominate men and situations. One day in his council house, while he was surrounded by his chiefs, who sat on the low stools, their heads averted from him as is the way when men are in the presence of the great, the plaid strip of cloth which covered the door was brushed aside, and a young man entered. He took up a stool, brought it close to the Granman, and sat down. But he did not avert his face nor did he wait to be addressed.

"Howdo, mati," said he to the Granman, "I hear you want to see me."

We waited for the swift and terrible rebuke which the chief could give. None came.

"I sent for you," began the Granman, "because the Bak'a is leaving us. I am sending the captain of the village to take charge of the boat the white man and his woman will travel in. You will take the front paddle of the boat. You will see to it that his journey is pleasant. You must take care in going through the rapids. . . ."

"Mati," interrupted the young man, and his manner did not disguise his impatience with the injunctions of the Granman. "Mati, I am a man. I know how to run a boat. Why do you tell me all this?"

Instead of finding fault with the forward youth, the Granman turned to us and said, "You will be safe with

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him. He has taken boats up and down the Marowynne. He is my grandson. If I had one of my own blood, I would have had him accompany you. . . . But my sisters' children sleep," he ended, using the euphemism for death.

When we came to know the young man, we asked him about this incident with the Granman. Was he not afraid to interrupt him?

"Ma kye! But he is my grandfather! With my grandfather I make sport."

Again we went to the old men and sought in village after village for their own explanation of this behavior toward grandparents.

There were, we learned, age distinctions that were deeply felt. A man was on easy terms with those of his own generation. Between parents and children, and those of the generation of their parents, however, there was a definite code of behavior. For example, no young man or woman might talk of sexual matters with either parent, and this lack of sanction for frankness in sexual discussions with parents became an actual taboo with parents-in-law. Encounters with the "pai" and "mai," as they were known, were hemmed in by countless prohibitions. A man might not sleep in the same house with either of them, nor might he eat with them out of the same dish. If he met either of his parents-in-law as he went along the path, he had to turn aside, make way for them, and cover his face. He might not pronounce their names, nor might they speak his. These observances held for women, too, and the ones we mention were by no means all.

With grandparents, however, a vastly different situation obtained.

"He is my grandson. I call him mati—friend. I make sport with him!"

"She is my granddaughter. She calls me husband. She makes free with me!"

"She is my granddaughter, we talk about everything. She calls me kambo, and I call her kambo." Again, we

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782 Now she could but say that the Granman had asked her to see to this.

"It is good medicine. Do not be afraid," she added, reassuringly.

She led the way to her quarter, but before we had gone past the open shrine she stopped, and her eyes narrowed as she tried to come to a decision. From the quarter we were approaching came a crooning, moaning sound.

787 "A god speaks. The Apuku god has come to a woman this morning. Come. We will go to the G'aman's women," she said as she retraced her steps.

644 On a squared log in back of the enclosed shrine which
888 adjoined the council house sat the Granman's principal wife. She was a woman who in her prime must have had beauty, but, though still erect, she had deep grooves on her face, and her breasts were the breasts of an old woman. Her head was closely shorn, as was the way of women whose children were grown. Like any other woman of the village she wore only the short cloth and the bit of kerchief which showed at her waist. Like the others she went to the provision ground almost daily. She and her younger daughter, who was named Wilhelmina for the Queen of Holland, [462] cared for their field together, and now they were working side by side.

644 Wilhelmina was more robust than her mother could have been at her age. She was tall, more her father's daughter. It was she who served his food and looked after his personal needs. She was the wife of the man who had brought the boat which Sedefo had rejected, because he did not trust its spirit. As she worked, her two children were with her, [855] the elder a child of three, sitting on the ground at her feet, and the other on her back, or in her lap nursing while she did her tasks.

Unlike her older sister, Wilhelmina had little of her father's astuteness, of his quick eye, or his schooled tongue. She went about with the slow, sensuous grace of someone not quite awake, while her older sister busied herself with making the rounds of the village, observing this and that

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778 of earth which filled the rest of the hut. In the left-hand
346 corner was a covered whitened vessel for the god called
Kentina Dagowe. This Kentina Dagowe was a deity who
776 was the offspring of the Dagowe-snake, and the Apuku god
778 of the bush whose name was Kentina. In him, as in so many
other of the spirits, we found exemplified the Bush Negro's
concept of the world which held that the gods mated as
did humans, that all which stirred and had life came into
being by such matings.

[773] Other spirits also came to this house, the woman went
on. Mundewayá, another of the bush gods, was worshiped
at the white-covered pot in the opposite corner, while
beside it lay the vessel to which the spirit of a third might
come. This one was the most powerful of all bush gods,
and his name was Danhowao. There were other objects
on the platform. Two stools, daubed with sacred clay, had
their place there, and in the center was an image of wood,
a rounded pot set on a base that tapered from the ground
toward it, and this was to the Nanai, the ancestors.

The old woman said, "For the Apuku gods, we only play
the tumao drum. The Apuku are mostly women's gods, but
some men have them, and the men who have them play
the drums. When the god comes to you, then if you are not
[888] too old you dance. But we old women do not dance. When
the god comes to me, then I begin to shake. I go into this
house on the day we call him, and they play the drum.
Then I talk to the god. If I have something to beg of him
for myself, or for someone else, then I put the pot which
[787] belongs to him on my head, and the drum calls him. When
my body begins to shake, then it is the god. He has come,
and when I speak it is not I but the god speaking."

226 From the clearing the talk of those who had remained
604 outside came through the thin woven walls of the shrine.
[203] From one to another we could hear the news spread that
in the village of the Granman across the river the gods had
spoken for the whites.

In the hut, we listened to the old woman inside whose
shrine we stood.

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He promised readily enough to go with us, but Bayo told us later that he would not come.

"He says the white doctor cannot do more than obia can do. He says a man must take what kunu brings."

Was there no obia against kunu? we asked of Bayo.

"No, but kunu is not greater than obia. It is something else. When the Sky God gave obia to man, he gave it to help man live, not to help him do bad things. When men and women earn a kunu for their family, it is because they [688] do what is hateful to the great gods and ancestors. Obia was not sent to save men from punishment."

"Does obia never punish, Bayo?" We were thinking of what he said about his own obia, of how when it seized him, he destroyed things.

But he would say no more. "I am too young, Bak'a, to [888] speak of these things. At my age I know only a little obia. You must ask the old men."

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The conversation led us one day to the obia men on the river. They were, we knew, important persons in the Bush Negro communities. An obia man of reputation was not only consulted by his own villagers and clansmen, but men and women came to him from distant villages, when those who were nearer had failed them. It occurred sometimes that even from the Awka villages on the lower river, these Saramacca obia men were sought out—perhaps this was because of the same tradition which encouraged the buying of strange gods to enlarge the family pantheon, perhaps it was because of something which touched still deeper beliefs.

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How did a man become an obia man?

From what we had already heard, it was apparent that here was something which approached the formal education of our own civilization, a form of education, indeed, which we pride ourselves is unique to our own way of life.

All other knowledge the Bush Negro child gains by being about with members of his family who are busy at

881 have a last look at the child's penis, as they will never see it again. Then the boy is proclaimed a man, and given clothes.

So far as could be observed, there is no circumcision of either the male or female, although such mutilations are indulged in by West African tribes in the region from which the Djukas came. The girls wear only the *coyo*, or a larger cloth known as *pangi*, until their first menstruation, when their mothers give them cloths. This is done in private. Menstruating women are required to leave their homes and retire 841 to a separate hut situated outside the village on a by-path; they may not return until three days after the period is over. Under no condition are they allowed to go to the provision fields during this time.

584 At the age of about sixteen or seventeen the children are
[582] ready to be married. Sometimes they are betrothed in infancy, and occasionally a pregnant woman will betroth her child before it is born, conditionally, of course, upon its sex. Once the child is betrothed the ceremony must take place, [754] otherwise the disappointed prospective mate will call down a *kunu*, or curse, on the entire perjured family, and they will all die. The pubescent child does not look forward to marriage as time for leaving its family, nor is marriage an [587] initiation into sex relations. For these two reasons, getting [949] married is not a serious step, and there is little illegitimacy because there is no reason for objecting to a marriage.

858 Youths must remain standing until their elders invite them
576 to be seated. It is customary for older people to receive much
● 888 respectful attention, for the older people are the sources of tradition and authority

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tradition and authority. The older women's opinions bear considerable weight, for it is chiefly they who maintain the customs of the tribe. The mother-in-law and father-in-law are held in special esteem. [106]

Unlike divorce, death is an occasion of genuine sorrow. If a man's wife dies, he may go into mourning for a whole year. His mourning consists in staying in his hut and doing no work, while his dead wife's family brings him food and supports him. When the year is up, he makes a sacrifice to "the little ground god, Amu" before taking another woman. He slaughters a fowl, letting the blood flow from the throat on to the earth. After this ritual sacrifice a big dance is held, and he is permitted to marry again. It is his next wife who insists upon this ritual. [776 782]

When a man dies, it is sometimes incumbent upon his widow to have intercourse with his oldest surviving brother and marry him. The fact that he may already be married makes no difference whatever. It is imperative that they live together for several months; after that, if there is no affection between them, they can separate. This is a widespread custom among primitives, and there are remnants of it in the present-day customs of orthodox Jews. 587

Among the Aucaners it is not necessary for a man to have intercourse with his deceased brother's wife. He must, however, take care of her for a period of six months, after which time she is free to remarry.

A woman may publicly mourn her deceased husband by singing a dirge every little while. [765]

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[372] they do not like to be without it; at least they do not like to
[353] sleep without a fire. Their weapons hang above their sleeping
[513] place, which is a hammock, in which man and wife sometimes lie
342 together. Rarely do more than one man and one woman with their
small children live in a single hut.

296 Their articles of clothing, as well as other small belongings,
251 are kept in pagalen, a kind of plaited basketwork, while they keep
415 water, strong drinks, sugar juice, rice, salt, and so forth in
824 calabashes and godos (2).

2. Both hollowed-out fruit rinds of the
Crescentia cagete L. and the Cucurbita
lagenaria L., plants from the family of
the Cucurbitaceae.

415 Some of them have cedarwood clothes-chests, which must
be specially mounted with a great deal of copper; one also some-
times finds liqueur cellars with gilded bottles.

353 For the rest everything is left out in the open in the hut.

264 Often many men come together in one hut for their meals
and eat out of one large bowl or calabash. The women withdraw
after having placed on very low tables several calabashes or bowls
of food for their husbands in the circle in which they are seated,
never forgetting to add a large calabash with clean water for
washing the hands before and after the meal. The women gather
in another hut in order to consume what they kept out for them-
selves beforehand and what has been left by their husbands.

• [888] If an aged person or a highly placed person is in their midst,
[554] he is offered the calabash of food first, so that he may take from
it what he wants and eat it by himself from an ordinary plate, al-
though seated in the circle, /10/ while the others partake of their
meal from the large bowl. In general they talk with one another
during the meal, the highly placed person also taking part in the
conversation.

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574 The politeness shown toward a guest springs from the idea that unknowingly one of them might easily take the very piece that the important person wished to have, and although no comment would be made on this, it could nonetheless happen that this would trouble the guest for whom they cherish special respect, or that he would thereby consider himself insulted. It is particularly to old age that they pay great respect.

Chapter VI

Household and Agricultural Implements

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[322] The Bush Negroes mainly use adzes in order to hew their corjalen or canoes out of trees partially burned out beforehand; [824] furthermore, they use planes and chisels in order to work their [531] (usually cedarwood) (1) stools and parels or paddles (2). They are

1. Cedrela odorata L.

2. Hand oar.

especially fond of having these carved with many figures. For them the machete is an indispensable tool that they always carry around and use as a chopping knife, sword, and knife, indeed, even to cut splinters or thorns out of the foot with the tip. They use field axes or hatchets to cut down the bush in order to lay out their small cultivation grounds and to work the wood that they float by rafts and sell.

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[824] The women possess, aside from a machete or knife, also mattocks with which they keep their lands and the place near the dwelling neat; they make brooms from the pina palm racemes or [413] from rice ears bound in sheaves. They like to have scissors, needles, and pins, while for knitting they use a pointed and bent nail. 413
[283] They spin their sewing thread from cotton with a certain tool which they call kéké; they also have a round, wooden tool [286] called sepoe, with which they very nicely and sturdily /11/ make

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561 The class of the young people, yunku sama, has definite
198 activities; "style," that is to say, elegance, dancing, singing; it has a special language made up from taki-taki by inversion or addition of syllables. When the language begins to be known outside the group of young people, it is abandoned and another is invented. These past years the language in vogue was akospina, of Djuka origin; it had given rise to a whole folklore of songs.

561 Two other age classes appear to be rather clearly differentiated: that of the elders /69/ - gañ sama - (older than some 50 years), whose voices are preponderant in the councils, and that of the old men - gañdi sama - (older than 65 to 70 years).

• [888] It is conceded by all that only the elders possess wisdom and knowledge, and in principle, in a discussion, the opinion of the eldest of them has the force of law.

575 Neither does one perceive among the Refugee Blacks any
571 customary societies playing a role comparable to the men's society in the Sudan for example. In a general way their social life, very individualistic in spite of appearances, knows no other organization than the one resulting from kinship ties.

767 Nevertheless, the organization of the men within each village with an eye to the mourning ceremonies can be regarded as a rough approximation to customary societies:

--Kisimā or coffin-makers;

--Olama or grave-diggers.

But these societies are narrowly specialized and their customary powers exist only as long as the duration of their effective work.

562 Men and women. Even within the lineage where men and women
571 call one another brother, sister, aunt ... the relations between men and women are marked by mistrust.

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[586] are his or not, he maintains them indirectly by maintaining his wife. He has only precarious authority. Every connection with the children disappears in case of divorce.

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[593] Guardianship is often exercised by the maternal grandmother, by an aunt, or even by an older sister.

If the maternal grandmother (or the great-grandmother if she is still living) insists on bringing up a child, the mother cannot refuse; one sees a rather large number of cases of women who have only one child and have given it to their mother to raise; it is true that since they live together, it is not a great sacrifice for the mother.

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[165] Thus one sees women over 70 years old, having had ten children or so, bringing up three or four of their grandchildren. The ancestress of Asisi village, Kuluba († 1957), after having had 12 children, brought up about ten of her children and grandchildren during the course of her long existence; when she died in 1957 at 100 years of age, she was still raising a child, one of her great-grandsons 12 years old. Of course she had not been working any more for a long time and was fed by her family, as the child was. But it was she who held the power of guardianship over him.

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593 If it is the father who is charged with the child's education, he takes him into his own maternal family. His sisters will help him to bring up the child as long as he needs the presence of a woman.

From then on the father will exercise guardianship corresponding to that which the mother usually exercises under the responsibility of the uncles.

Sometimes a man is seen bringing up a daughter. Generally speaking, if a man /128/ has had three or more children by one woman, it is considered normal for him to be given one to raise, but that does not constitute a right; he cannot demand anything.

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765 Before coming out of mourning, the widow must procure
431 for herself at the minimum the money necessary for a demijohn
of tafia as a contribution to the festival of the lifting of mourn-
[606] ing. She must make a present of several cans of couac to her
husband's mother.

765 A pregnant woman undergoes mourning exactly according
843 to the general law. The custom described by several authors
184 for the Saramaka, according to which the pregnant woman must
join one of her husband's "brothers," does not apply to the Boni.

765 There are some attenuations of the harshness of mourning
888 with respect to old women. For example in 1956, Lémiki
(70 years), living in Boniville, was in mourning for her husband
Tabiki (Awara Bakka, but residing since childhood with the
Lapé lineage in Loka /180/ where he had been raised by his

[768] father). Lémiki alternately spent three weeks in her house and
[602] three in her husband's. It was Asamani, Tabiki's sister by the
same father, who exercised authority over her.

765 This remarkable example shows that as regards mourning
768 (rights and duties), the principle of residence plays an essential
[613] role. He who has been reared by his father is in this respect
taken out of his lineage, which loses all rights and all control
over the conduct of the mourning.

765 The co-wives of a widower are subject to mourning on
[775] the same grounds as he, and for the same motive, since they
are targets for the jealousy of the dead woman's yorka.

[768] However, they are authorized most often to live with their
maternal family. When the period of dipi baaka has ended,
765 they may take up conjugal relations again with their husband,
833 but at intervals of several weeks and without his being able to
[613] spend the night with one of them. Each time he must ask per-
mission of the head of the dead woman's lineage.

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784 The kunu and Boni family life. It follows from the detailed
613 examination we have just made of the situation of the various
[428] lineages that the transmission of the kunu within the uterine
kin group is a rigorous law which suffers no exception whatever.
[501] The process of assimilation which permits in a certain measure,
[602] on the social plane, the integration of fragments of paternal
kin (like Awara Bakka 3) into a group does not come into play
here. Unity with respect to the kunu can therefore be regarded
[611] as a rigorous criterion of a common matrilineal origin. The
[829] Boni feel it as an obvious fact and in such a case it is the proof
that comes to their minds: "We are of the same origin since
we have the same kunu."

784 Thus the kunu appears as the principal cement of the
613 unity of the groups. It opposes the dissociation of the lineages;
571 this curse which weighs collectively upon a group and which
182 can be exorcised only collectively is an iron bond which
nothing can break. It obliges the Refugee Blacks to surmount
their individualistic tendencies, their egoism which, if they
acted freely, would soon have scattered them into a dust of
separate persons. In the face of adversity each one accepts
[888] with good grace obedience to the elders, who alone know how
to talk to the gods and appease them. Nobody ever is indignant
[672] or even surprised to be struck down for the offense of another;
there is not a movement of revolt or hostility against the one
who by his inattention or inconsiderateness has brought on
misfortune. On this plane the members of a lineage feel like
cells of a single body.

784 The collective legal responsibility of the members of a
613 group in the domain of customary law flows from the kunu.
672 We have observed that several times, notably at the time of
the obsequies for Kotoïda (Afi lineage) in October, 1956.
The president of the lānti kuutu condemned the members of

/232 cont. /

787 In a general way, they consider that the bearer of a god
784 exercising the kunu has nothing to fear from it personally if he
776 rigorously observes the kina which have been imposed upon
him. On the other hand, this god will punish any injury to
[542] its bearer. Thus these bearers (almost always old women) live
[888] surrounded by respect and fear.

784 /233/ Observations in January, 1958 (misfortunes attributed to
769 vengeance of ancestors on their own lineage).
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75 Do (Lapé) is taken ill on January 7, 1958 with a violent
attack of dysentery. The same day his five-year-old son is
grievously hurt at the wharf by falling on a broken bottle.

[787] Alarmed by this coincidence, the members of the Lapé lo
assemble and proceed to question a possessed person. The latter
reveals that it is the doing of an old woman of the lineage,
Atala, dead for two years. Several lineage members have al-
ready been sick from this; the dead woman wanted to sanction
offenses committed by the people of the lineage.

The same day in Boniville, Klémenti (Dju), to whom I
am recounting this affair, tells me that before the lifting of
mourning for his mother Béniti, he and his sisters were sick.

[787] Divination showed that it was the doing of Béniti, who wished
to hasten the celebration of the ceremony.

784 The kunu and social peace among the Boni. Role of the grand
775 man. The kunu exercised by a yorka creates very strange re-
613 lations among the Boni lineages. As blind and arbitrary as the
591 vengeance attributed to the yorka may be, the Boni have the
sense of the legal unity of the lineage too much for any resent-
ment to exist: "They are killing our family..."; and yet the
two lineages find themselves henceforth irreparably bound to-
[782] gether. The victims of the kunu can no longer get along without
people of the lineage of the yorka which pursues them with its
vengeance, since they alone, by their prayers, can appease
temporarily the anger of their ancestor. One conceives of the

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787 very serious question, the asker contents himself with going to interrogate a divinity in which he has confidence. If, when put to the test, the advice turns out to be bad, he goes to consult others and if he obtains the same advice from two different directions, he stops there. If not, he appeals to the elders of his village to bring into play the processes of divination which they alone know.

[888]
[791] A second category of divinatory procedures consists in the use of "remedies," whose origin is unknown and which are transmitted like a personal belonging.

[428] The process reputed to be the surest, in which everybody has confidence, is called pusu. The instrument is composed simply of a rope made of fibers of the Mauritia (2) palm tree

[439] 2. Palm tree which grows in the coastal savannas and whose fibers are bought from the Galibi Indians. The word pusu, like gita, kandu, mula, is of Congolese origin. In Kikongo, mpuusu = raffia palm tree.

which has been dipped in an infusion of herbs; it is stretched horizontally between two stakes. The elder brings near it a machete blade heated red-hot, at the same time asking the question. If the answer is positive, the rope is cut when the iron has scarcely touched it. If the answer is no, they state that the red-hot iron remains in contact with the rope for an appreciable length of time without the rope's being cut.

They will say for example: ɛfu na Ampuku siki X, a how a 'ā mu do: fosi a kɔti: If it is an Ampuku which is making X sick, the machete must cut (the rope) before (even) reaching it.

791/237 cont. /

● 888 Not just anyone may resort to divination on behalf of someone else: only the eldest have the right to do it, and it has happened that the grand man punished offenders severely.

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[752] Fate. The Refugee Blacks do not attribute all misfortunes to suprahuman causes. They have the notion of natural accident, ɔŋgɔɔku. They say ɔŋgɔɔku miti mi, or again ogi miti mi, [761] misfortune met me. They also accept the idea of natural death. They usually regard as natural death that of the very old, the infirm from birth, and sickly children.

[787]

Divination blames fate in ten to 20 per cent of accidents.

[752]

It is the usual explanation for hunting accidents.

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Magic Forces

As we have shown, the Refugee Blacks consider beings and things as a world of forces capable of acting on one another, outside of time and space, according to laws which men cannot understand but of which they believe they have a partial and empirical knowledge transmitted by tradition since the time of the ancestors. They distinguish negative magic forces, 754 wisi, which have the effect of diminishing the vital force of 789 men, which makes them sick or kills them, and positive magic forces, ɔbia, which come from the gods: the ɔbia comes to increase the vital force of men, giving them protection, immunity, or knowledge. But no power is in essence a principle of good or evil; nothing is impossible for him who knows the formulas; this is why the magic of the Refugee Blacks is reduced to a perpetual and indecisive struggle between ɔbia and wisi.

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[673]

Wisi. Wisi is sorcery in the African sense of the term, that is, the use of magic procedures to harm others; wisi is for the Refugee Blacks the pre-eminently criminal act, at the same time against morals and against society. The struggle against

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[174] White clay, pemba (the word and the rite are of
Congolese origin), does not undergo any special preparation.
In the thought of the Refugee Blacks it has the power to fix
upon a man's body the magic influence of the infusion of leaves.

791 Among the Boni, except for the cult of Odun, there are
no priests, strictly speaking, invested with a function at the
same time social and religious. A large number of persons
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791 are regarded as "knowing remedies." This notion implies at
once knowledge and power. In general the obiamā is believed
to hold only a specialized power: for example, he knows how
to prepare a hunting obia, or an obia for protection against
wisimā. This power he received from his father (as an ex-
ception, it seems, from his uncle), who instructed him, before
dying, in the specialized rites it requires and transmitted
his power to him by giving him mula.

To give mula to someone, one blows into his hands,
one puts them on his head while uttering a formula by which
one transmits to him a certain power or piece of magic
knowledge.

What is the criterion of legitimacy? Who has the right
to call himself an obiamā? It seems that basically everything
is reduced to this: the obiamā has the conviction, the sensation
that he holds this power; as for his clients, they believe they
observe the efficacy of his obia; if they stop having confidence
in his remedy, they will abstain from coming to ask it of him,
that is all; no social prohibition comes to limit the action of
the obiamā. The grand man intervenes only against someone
[754] who might claim to hold remedies to harm another person or
to capture his will, which would be wisi. /250/

• [888] /249/ The Boni accept the possibility of deception as regards
obia, especially by people who are too young, but they have
the conviction that the elders (people over 55-60) possess
wisdom and that one can apply to them with complete confidence.

/295 cont. /

648 Indians to trade with them than with the Europeans and Creoles; the Boni are a graded society in which things tend to take place according to well-defined norms. It suffices to compare the Oayana Indians, who have kept the essentials of their civilization, with the Indians of the Oyapok to be convinced that the Boni have protected the former much more than they have oppressed them.

[464] Relations with the Creoles. The Boni are in constant contact with Creole gold miners and traders, for the benefit of whom they carry out many kinds of work (boating, tree-felling, construction). Most of them speak the Creole dialect very well and are well informed on the Creole type of life.

[829] On the whole, relations between the two groups are good. On the Upper Maroni, it is mainly a matter of Creoles of African blood, who have come from the British West Indies, whom the Boni do not consider to be extremely different from themselves. Many have been settled there for a very long time, and individual friendships have become established; yet the two groups have not the least tendency to merge.

/296/ The Creoles have only scorn for the civilization of the Refugee Blacks, which reminds them of a detested African past. They have a feeling of superiority and do not cease exhorting the Boni to adopt their clothing and way of life.

829 The feelings that the Boni have toward the Creoles are complex; they clearly perceive that the activity of the gold miners is artificial and that isolated people are incapable of living by their own efforts in the midst of this pitiless forest. When they have become old and sick, the gold miners experience the worst distress and literally die of hunger until they are evacuated to the hospice of Saint Laurent. Among the Refugee Blacks, old men are assured of a decent life in the midst of the members of their lineage, who surround them with affectionate respect.

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829 This is a point of view which has great importance in the eyes of the Boni, for whom finishing one's days at the hospice or being reduced to asking for the help of outsiders constitutes the worst downfall.

829 They fear, moreover, as we have shown, Creole magic which they liken to a form of wisi.

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[114] On the other hand, they are impressed by the attainments of the Creoles, the real spirit of initiative and the strong personality of some of them; moreover, the Boni who have been to Cayenne have noticed the solicitude of the administration with respect to the population of the communes. For all these reasons there exists among the Boni a certain body of opinion in favor of creolization. But the very unique type of life of the Boni and their desire to keep their special ~~as~~ attach them to their ancestral form of life; about 1890 the explorer Coudreau, observing the same facts, was predicting imminent creolization of the Boni. In fact, this did not happen, and it is unlikely to.

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464 Traditional relations with Europeans. The Refugee Blacks constitute an important element in the economic life of the Guianas; on behalf of the administration and European enterprises they perform many jobs (boating, wood-floating, tree-felling).

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[465] They are not well adapted to other kinds of work, but in these activities which fit with their traditional mode of life they are equal if not superior to any labor. Very highly paid, they work with speed, effectiveness, and intelligence, exhibiting an initiative and sense of duty not commonly found in Africans(1).

- [77]
1. It is to be noted that if they stop leading their traditional kind of life, for example if they settle permanently near European establishments, they rapidly lose these qualities.